

OUTDOORS PLUS

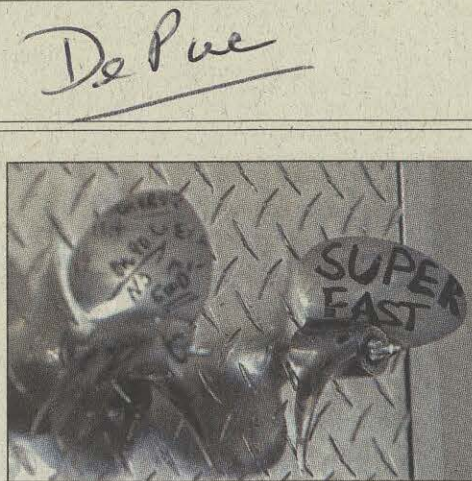
'You only have a throttle and you don't have any brakes.'

—Racer Paul Bosnich III of De Pue

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The buzz in De Pue

Powerboat racers believe most people know little about their sport. That's not the case in this little Downstate town, where the sport reigns as king.

By Lew Freedman

Tribune outdoors reporter

DE PUE, Ill.—A curtain of spray shooting higher than Buckingham Fountain trailed Eddie Thirlby's black 700cc hydro boat as he circled Lake De Pue's milelong oval at 100 m.p.h. On a muggy, sunny day, the buzz of pursuing boats was louder than a swarm of mosquitoes.

Diving into the turn around the orange buoys, one boat pulled even. From shore, where thousands strained for a look, spray whitewashed everything. And then the black boat shot clear. For the remainder of the four laps, it was Eddie and the cruisers once again.

Yet Thirlby, 38, of Traverse City, Mich., won his 30th national title only after making his way through his second heat with a boat full of water from an undone valve line and finishing his third heat while spewing smoke. Perhaps he should be called Thrills By.

"I got lucky today," Thirlby said.

There are no sure things in powerboat racing, where it takes three heats to determine a winner; engines are as fragile as Ken Griffey Jr.'s hamstring, last-boat-floating survival is common and captains do go down with their ships.

"You only have a throttle and you don't have any brakes," said racer Paul Bosnich III of De Pue.

That pretty much says it all.

The American Power Boat Association brought its professional outboard championships to Lake De Pue for three days at the end of July, and amid a carnival of speed and noise, crashes and splashes, crowned 19 national titlists. In more than 75 heats, drivers who best held their act together prevailed.

The spotlight on the 19th annual visit of 150 drivers from two dozen states, Japan, Austria and Slovakia also rekindled hope among De Pue's 1,800 residents, who dare to imagine that someday their lake will provide an economic bounty.

"We are a dying community," said Mayor Don Bosnich Jr., 59, who is Paul's cousin. "We are unique because of this [event]."

Marquette and Joliet aren't passing this way again, so this tiny, job-desperate, Bureau County town 10 miles south of Interstate Highway 80 dreams of generating income by establishing a tourism magnet along the silvery waters of the 4-mile-long lake. If only some sugar daddy will ante up nearly \$11 million to dredge the silt runoff from the Illinois River. If only the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Corps of Engineers will bless the lake's cleansing and upgrade.

"I'm afraid I'm going to die before I see it," the mayor said.

Meanwhile, De Pue has cast its lot with powerboat racing.

Little-understood sport

There is no big-money TV contract. There are no big-salary athletes. And the powerboat association's U.S. Title Series stops in Constantine, Mich., St. Joseph, Mo., Hammond, Ind., and Alexandria, La. Maybe the little-understood sport is just the right fit for little De Pue.

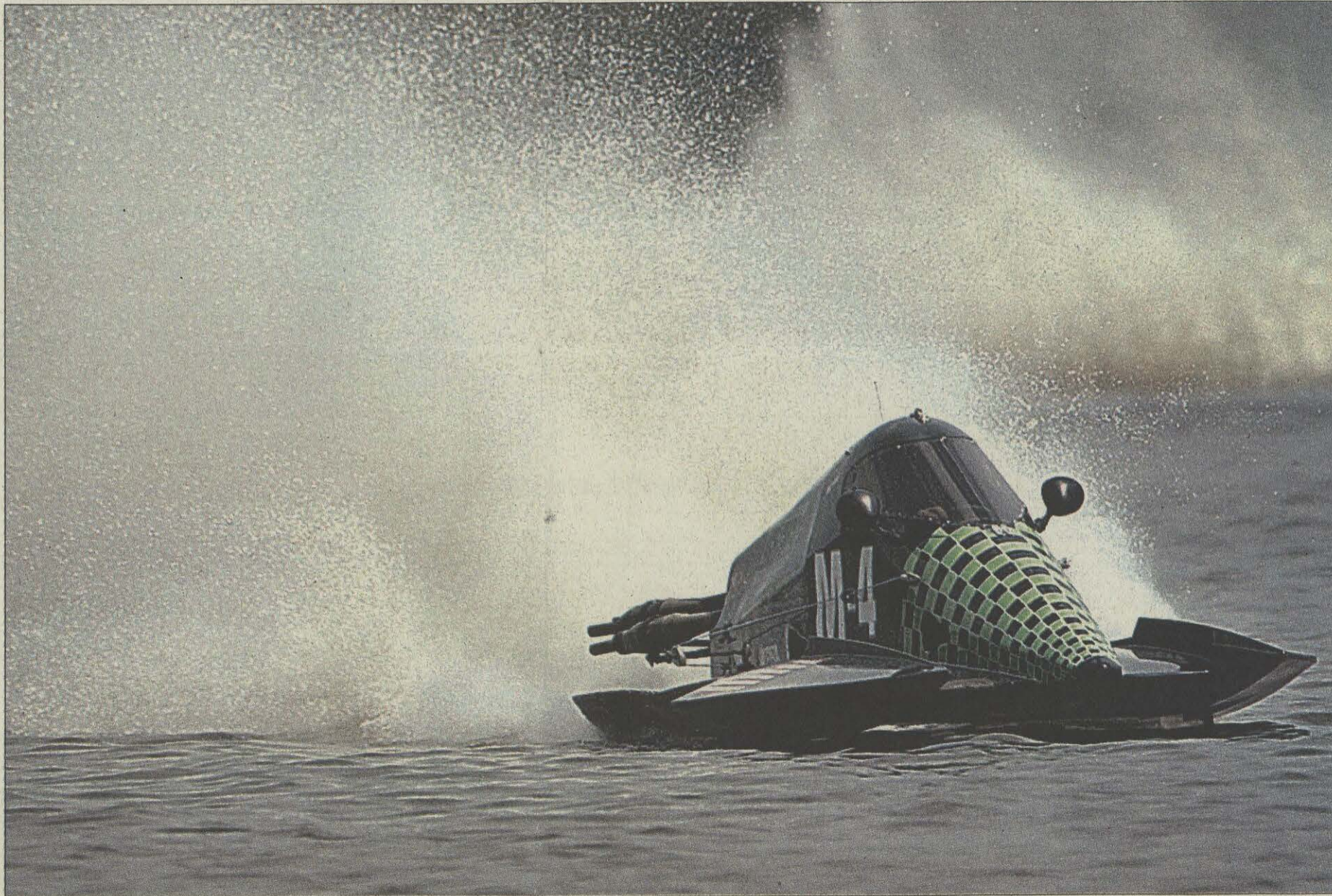
Howard Anderson, 74, of Edmonds, Wash., a racer for 54 years, said the average person has "no clue" about his sport.

There are common misconceptions about powerboat racing. One is that drivers sit at the steering wheel. Actually, most kneel and some lie down. Boats are made of mahogany, not fiberglass. And most boats are alcohol-fueled, not gasoline-powered.

An exception is the OSY400 class. In Japan, those engines—and the sport—are so popular, there is parimutuel wagering.

They know their stuff in De Pue too. Spectators line the half-mile-long shoreline five deep in their lawn chairs.

The total purse was \$18,000. Class winners earned plaques and checks for \$375. Seventh



Lake De Pue in De Pue, Ill., was awash in rooster tails and engine noise during the American Power Boat Association's recent professional outboard championships. At left, spectators watch boats prepare for a race. Above, Eddie Thirlby of Traverse City, Mich., goes full throttle in competition. Thirlby uses several propellers (top), depending on conditions, one facetiously labeled "super fast."

Tribune photos by John Krings

place paid \$20.

Larry Latta, 60, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, ran a \$3,000 motor and a \$3,000 boat in the 125cc Run-about class, finishing second.

"We might make 10 or 20 percent of our expenses," said Latta, who has been racing for 45 years.

These may be the only motor-sport vehicles in America not plastered with sponsor decals. Thirlby, who also races cars and travels with a huge moving van filled with spare parts, said it's no mystery why there is a dearth of sponsor dollars.

"We use boats the general public doesn't buy, engines the general public doesn't buy and propellers the general public doesn't buy," he said. "And we don't race locally."

De Pue pays for the hungry-for-love national championships with affection and the use of its greatest natural resource.

"The water conditions are always like this—calm," said Fred Miller of Round Lake, an association race coordinator. "That's a big thing. The people are great. If you're coming from California or New Jersey, it's smack in the middle of the country."

Organized racing on Lake De Pue dates to 1932, said John Widmar Jr., treasurer of De Pue Men's Club, the local event organizer. The town hosted its first national championships in 1961. After dredging removed the silt that cost the town the powerboats for a decade, the men's club became host in 1984.

"This is the town's celebration," Widmar said. "We're

bringing up new generations of fans."

New generations of racers too. Tim Brinkman, 19, who won his first two senior national titles, is a fourth-generation driver.

"It's a whole family thing," Brinkman said. "I grew up around it. I've been watching since I was 6 months old."

Fathers, sons, brothers, grandsons, cousins. The heat sheets were littered with relatives.

Tuned on the edge

Powerboat racers may be motorheads on waves, but their machinery apparently comes without warranty. Doesn't matter if it is a 125cc engine or an 1100. Doesn't matter if the boat is as streamlined as a rocket ship or has an open cockpit and needle nose. Doesn't matter if the engine sounds like a Cessna 180, power saw or mosquitoes—for all of the drivers' wrench work in the pits, the dang-blam engine is susceptible to blowing like Mt. St. Helens. "We've got them tuned right on the edge of destruction," said Mike Thirlby, Eddie's younger brother.

Mike Thirlby, 31, stalled out in the final but won the national title in the 350cc Runabout category on points accumulated from two heats. He had no idea why the engine quit.

"Once in a while you get some weird, good luck," he said.

It's not all faulty machinery. Drivers miscalculate the flying start or zoom out of bounds, giving them unwanted initials—DNE, DQ, DNS—instead of place

numbers next to their names on the scoresheet.

Ben Black, 23, of Spokane, Wash., was a dazed victor in the 500 sprint hydro category when all four racers in the final heat were disqualified for driving outside the buoy markers.

"Really strange," Black said.

Not so strange as the final heat of the Antique C Race Hydro class, with only one legal finisher among eight starters. Isn't that how short-track speed-skating medals were won in the Winter Olympics?

One reason engines seem so flaky is that they're pushed hard.

"If you hold your foot to the floor in a car, you can get the engine up to 6,000 r.p.m.," said Eddie Thirlby, who later won his 31st national title. "In the boat, it's 12,000 r.p.m. continuously."

Visions and reality

Mayor Bosnich, now in his 10th year in office, envisions De Pue evolving into a resort town. He sees an economic windfall for a community with a sub-\$1 million annual budget whose residents often commute to Princeton, Peru and LaSalle for work. He pictures opportunities replacing the long-gone Mobil Chemical Co. fertilizer plant and the New Jersey Zinc Co. smelter, among the suspects in the contamination of the lake.

But he also confronts reality.

There are no advisories against fishing or swimming in Lake De Pue, even though preliminary tests found zinc and copper in the water. It's just that

anyone who wants to go boating, canoeing or water skiing may run across a spot where the lake is only 6 inches deep because the Illinois River is encroaching, bringing silt that fills in the depths.

The only reliable boating is within the racing oval, where the lake's depth is 10 feet.

Even if a rich benefactor materialized bearing the millions needed to dredge the lake, and even if additional studies show no unhealthy concentrations of copper and zinc, it would take years for state and federal permits to be issued, said Rich Lange, project manager for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's going to require long-term, intensive study," said Lange, who noted that when De Pue dredged the 3,500-foot-by-900-foot oval 20 years ago, the effort removed 400,000 cubic yards.

Removing silt in "an environmentally sound manner" is a complicated process, Lange said. And even though the departed companies have shown a willingness to help clean up the lake, Lange said repeatedly that testing, permitting and dredging would take "several years."

Bosnich is right to worry about not living to see Lake De Pue blossom.

Speed brings scares

Where there is speed, there is danger. Scary things happen when boats traveling 100 m.p.h. collide.

Pete Kelly of Lakeland, Fla.,

and Marian Jung of Slovakia finished the Antique C Race Hydro class in a spray of water, then collided and flipped. The men bobbed in the water, their orange helmets and orange Kevlar suits visible amid the floating debris. Jung was transported by ambulance to St. Margaret's Hospital in Spring Valley, where he was examined and released. Kelly emerged from the water with a bruised right leg.

They caught each other's draft, Kelly said, and the air pull hurled them upside down. Jung, who speaks little English, hit harder.

"I saw a boat going over my head," Kelly said. "I don't know if it was my boat or his boat. I asked, 'Are you hurt?' He said, 'Yes.' He was holding my hand in the water."

The dimensions of boats vary, but many are 12 feet long and weigh barely more than 100 pounds, so on impact pieces fly. Crashes silence the crowd. Fans remember the fatal crash of Gerry Drake of Lawrenceville, Ga., in 1993.

On a calm-water closing day, there were still five crashes.

When Paul Fuchslin of Dixon, Calif., and Mike Krier of Ollie, Iowa, collided in the 350cc Runabout class, they hit so hard that Fuchslin was knocked out of his shoes. And that wasn't even the most spectacular crash.

As the pack in 250cc hydro accelerated on the first straightaway, the boat belonging to Denny Henderson, 52, of Garland, Texas, stopped. Michael Schmidt of Durham, Conn., tried to steer between boats. The hole disappeared, the rooster tail spray eliminating visibility, and Schmidt's prop sliced into Henderson's boat. Henderson weakly waved for help as he lay on the remains of the boat.

"The motor died and I slowly drifted to a stop," said Henderson, after returning from the hospital. "I thought I would be OK. Then the lights went out. I thought I was in bad shape. I had never been hit that hard."

Henderson wore a sling on his bruised left arm and his boat was in more pieces than Humpty Dumpty. Both driver and boat were looking at repair work in the pits. Just more evidence that powerboat racing is a hard game.